

Best Inclusion & Diversity Programme



Context & Background

The Local Government Staff Commission for Northern Ireland had been working in partnership with local councils and other stakeholders on two important equality initiatives; Women in Local Councils since January 2006, and Disability in Local Councils since September 2009. Both these initiatives have been very successful in raising the profile of women and people with disabilities in councils.

In order to build on this success, and to avoid duplication of effort, the Commission established a single Equality and Diversity Group which encompassed the work of the Women's Development Steering Group and the Disability in Local Councils Stakeholder Group and also included all other equality and diversity work in councils, including Section 75 statutory duties.

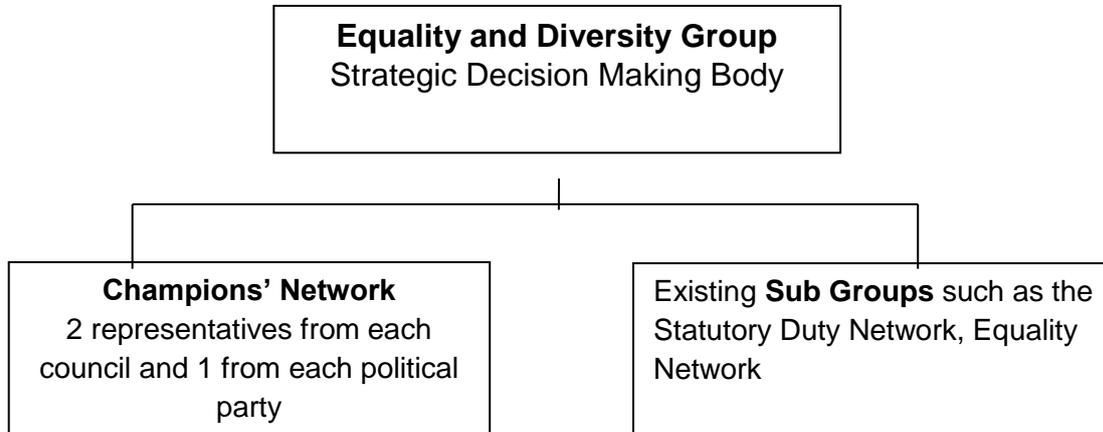
One of the key elements of this initiative has been the development of a Local Government Equality and Diversity Strategy and Action Plan to actively promote the equality and diversity agenda in councils.

This will be done by working in partnership with councils:

- to address equality and diversity issues
- to ensure continuity of the ongoing equality and diversity activities
- to support cross-sectoral initiatives
- to involve and inform external stakeholders
- to pilot new equality and diversity initiatives

Structure

Reporting to the Local Government Staff Commission (who would also carry out the secretariat function for the group), a two-tier structure was proposed, to reflect the strategic and operational aspects of the Group, as follows:



Functions

The Equality and Diversity Group is the strategic decision making body with responsibility for:

- the development of the overall strategic direction for equality and diversity initiatives in local government
- determining priorities and setting objectives
- monitoring progress and reporting to the Local Government Staff Commission on a regular basis

The Champions' Network provides a forum of support and networking for the elected member and officer Champions and meets quarterly.

There were also existing sub groups such as the Statutory Duty Network (comprising of Council Equality Officers) and the Equality Network (comprising of HR officers) which would continue to meet, together with specific task and finish groups which were established as required for example, to develop a model equality schemes or to prepare draft model employment policies.

Membership

The Equality and Diversity Working Group was grounded in the membership of the Women's Development Steering Group but expanded to include a wider range of equality and diversity stakeholders across the local government sector. The membership will include:

Equality Commission for NI
Chief Executive, Local Government Staff Commission for NI
Chief Executive, Disability Action
Chief Executive, Community Relations Council
An Independent Equality Consultant
NIPSA representative
SOLACE nominees
PPMA NI representative
Statutory Duty Network representative

The Champions' Network comprises an elected member and an officer Diversity Champion from each of the 11 councils, and a Diversity Champion from each political party.

An Equality and Diversity Framework was developed which details a Council's statement of intent and approach to meeting their equality and diversity obligations and to demonstrate their compliance with them. The Framework covers everyone who uses a council's services, facilities and accesses information.

A Strategy and Action Plan was developed to guide the work of the Equality and Diversity Group in the longer term, and to focus on the action plan for 2016 - 2019. It was developed following consultation with members of the Equality and Diversity Group, the groups which the members represent, and other stakeholders.

In focussing on these activities, continuing to work with our stakeholders and responding to their needs, the Equality and Diversity Group aims to support and assist councils to ensure equality of opportunity and good relations as an Employer, a Service Provider and a Civic Leader.

Reporting Mechanisms

Progress on meeting the activities detailed in the action plan is:

- reported to members of the Equality and Diversity Group at their quarterly meetings
- a copy of the minutes of the Equality and Diversity Group meetings is included on the Staff Commission meeting agendas for information
- members report back to the stakeholder group they represent.

Outputs to date

The work of the Equality and Diversity Group has resulted in the following benefits for the Northern Ireland local government sector:

- officers and members are well informed on equality and diversity issues
- councils are representative of the communities which they serve
- local government is recognised for best practice in equality and diversity
- officers and members are supported and developed through a coaching and mentoring network
- external stakeholders have a mechanism to share their views and information with councils
- councils benefit from cross-sectoral working and initiatives
- councils are able to demonstrate to their citizens that they are committed to equality and diversity in the development of policy and the delivery of services to the whole community which they serve.

This initiative has been cost neutral as the councils have been able to achieve more by working together through the Equality and Diversity Group. For example:

- all 11 Councils in Northern Ireland have appointed a number of officer and elected member Diversity Champions. Some also have specific champions such as Disability Champions or Gender Champions
- training and support is provided centrally through a Development Programme for Diversity Champions which has included for example, Unconscious Bias and Stress Awareness
- each year a small fund (around £10,000 in total) is provided centrally for councils to hold equality and diversity events. The central fund provides match funding with the councils and funding has been provided for events such as:
 - Women in Sport conference
 - Visible Women conference
 - Food Regulation Events in Minority Languages for example, Mandarin Chinese
 - 'Have a Go Days' at local leisure centres with participants from a local Men's Shed to improve mental and physical health
 - Cultural Celebrations of BME communities